

June 4, 2006

“Desiring a Refreshing Wind”
Fred L Hammond

One hundred years ago on Azusa Street in Los Angeles a group of men and women gathered to pray in revival. This was an old-fashioned, bible-thumpin’, hands-up-in-the-air, hot-glory-hallelujah kind of revival. And then something happened. People began to speak in what sounded like strange languages. This event is heralded as the beginning of the Pentecostal movement in the Christian Church. From this beginning, several Pentecostal denominations were born such as The Assemblies of God, Church of God, and Pentecostal Holiness Church. Pentecostalism is rivaled only by Islam as being the fastest growing faith in the world today.

There is one major difference between what happened on Azusa Street and what happened in the Christian text we just heard. The difference is this: “each one heard them speaking in his or her own language.” In Pentecostalism and in the charismatic movement that occurred in the 1960s and 70s, people who heard others speaking in tongues could not understand each other unless the hearers were supernaturally graced to do so. There is only one place that I know of where people speak in other tongues and others are able to understand them. That place, my friends, is right here in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. It is a gift that we often fail to cultivate to its fullest potential. What am I talking about? Did I suddenly say words that seem to be incomprehensible? I am going to do what many Pentecostal ministers do when preaching and refer back to the text of the day. The text states that when all of these Jews who came from all over the known world to worship in Jerusalem heard the disciples speak, they heard them speak in their own language and were amazed. The men and women who had gathered, still in grief over the death of their teacher, began to speak in words that others could hear and understand.

And who are we? We are a people who gather together who profess no specific creed. Right here, in this congregation, we have people who profess a Christian faith, a Hindu faith, a Jewish faith, an atheist, pagan, or possibly even a New Thought faith. We are a diverse people who speak many different tongues, yet here we are, covenanting together to create a community that welcomes, promotes our differences. We have chosen to dialogue together about our various creeds so that when we meet a person who has a creed that is different than ours, we can be open and affirming with that person. We have learned, some better than others, to hear those beliefs and creeds in our own language and at the same time honor the unique differences of their faith.

My spiritual journey includes the Catholic charismatic movement. I remember prayer meetings where softly in one section a person would begin to sing in tongues, and then another, and then another. Suddenly, the whole room would be singing. Some would have the melody lines and others carried the harmonies. The voices would rise and fall easily like waves on the ocean and then, as if conducted by an unseen hand, the singing would stop. It was a very beautiful experience of harmony. But one can only have harmony if different notes are being sung. Here we are, singing our song together, a

Humanist voice joining with a Hindu voice, a Christian voice, a pagan voice. And what is more, we are coming together in understanding. We understand that each of us is needed to make the beloved community.

On Memorial Day, Faith Leaders for Peace came together to offer a memorial service for those who have died in the Iraqi war. The service was coordinated in part by a Unitarian Universalist. We know how to do interfaith services. We know how to include voices that on the surface might seem to have disparity and find the common thread that weaves us together. At the same time we know how to honor the differences of those threads. Why aren't we doing any more of this? Is it because we think the threads aren't strong enough to form a durable fabric. Ask any weaver and you will hear that silk is spun from the finest of threads made by the silkworm, and yet when woven together is a strong fabric. So too, are the threads of diversity that create our faith of Unitarian Universalism. Our faith is poised in a moment of history to create great changes in society. Are we ready to see this opportunity and grab hold of it? There is great desire in this country right now for something different, for something of value to sweep this nation. People have seen the results of narrowly defined faith to one set of dogmas. They have seen that to do so will increase intolerance and bigotry. To grab hold to one set of answers and dogmatically hold fast to them has proved disastrous in this country and in other countries abroad. What is good for me is not necessarily good for you. People in this country are also beginning to see this as truth. This is a truth that we Unitarian Universalists have known since the days of William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Therefore, we have honored the diversity of beliefs within our hallowed walls and have discovered the diversity of belief add to our humanity and understanding of life. We have discovered that it is our diversity that makes us stronger spiritually and gives us increased insight into the mystery we call life.

Recently in our Religious Education classes, we were teaching about Buddha Day, the day when Buddhists honor the life of Buddha. One of the stories told by the Buddha was shared with our children. Four blind men were asked to describe an elephant. One blind man felt the legs of the elephant and said the elephant was like four huge trees, sturdy and strong. A second man felt the side of the elephant and said, "No that is not so. The elephant is like a huge wall, tall and wide." A third man, after feeling the trunk of the elephant said, "No, you are mistaken. The elephant is like a snake, able to coil and strike." The fourth man, after feeling the tail said, "No, you are all wrong. The elephant is like a whip." The Buddha said that we are like the four men, only able to see from our perspective but not able to see the whole. We had our children draw out these various images to see what this elephant might look like and the picture was quite silly. We have this understanding of truth that our individual perspectives are valid. Yet, only when we combine them can we even begin to gain a glimpse of the whole. We also know that even combining our perspectives might still lead to a distorted, perhaps silly, picture of what the elephant of truth might look like. Yet it is this perspective that needs to be heard in our land today because we know that in dialogue, in using all of our gifts, that the hard, rough boundaries of these images begin to soften

and transform, allowing the true essence and shape of the elephant to begin to come into focus.

There is a hunger that is sweeping this land for the resurrection of living our values of compassion, of justice making, of right relationship. The dogmatism that categorizes people into the saved and the not saved, the good and the evil, is failing in its mission. It is not creating heaven on earth. It is not transforming people into living in this society as Jesus, Mohammed, or even as the Buddha, taught and lived. Instead, America has seen an increase of intolerance, an increase of “I will treat you with compassion and respect if, and only if, you accept my values, my beliefs, my ideology.” The dogmatism is being seen for what it is in America today. People are seeking for a realization of the American values of liberty and justice for all. This resurgence for values that honor our nation’s diversity is seen in the recent marches for immigration rights. This resurgence for values that honor civil liberties is seen in the allegation of illegal activities of governmental wire-tapping of phone conversations and internet e-mails. This resurgence for values that honor the dignity and worth of all of our citizens is seen in the uproar over racial inequity in response to provide aid in the wake of Katrina. This resurgence for values that honor ethical and humane treatment of all people is seen in the exposing of the brutal behavior of Guantanamo Bay and the slaughter of innocents in Iraq.

We stand at a precipice of a new day in America. How we, as Unitarian Universalists, enter that new day will define us a people of faith. There is in our nation a desiring for a refreshing wind. Unitarian Universalists have an opportunity to be a part of that wind of change that blows across this nation. If we are not willing to seize this opportunity, I can guarantee you that it will be seized by others. Recently I received a pamphlet from a church describing itself as progressive theology. They define this theology as “a life lived” and they quote Mahatma Gandhi “My life is my message” to further illustrate this theology. This progressive-minded church is poised to grow and make an impact on San Diego. Their outreach and social action programs are spiritual and personal to where people live. That congregation is offering an appeal to people who want to make a difference in healing and empowering the oppressed and broken-hearted. They are offering social justice programs encompassing the broad picture of justice making, not just political advocacy. How do we as Unitarian Universalists live our message? Or do we? If we are not living our message, then how will people know that our liberal faith is central in our lives? If we are not living our message, then how will society benefit from our presence? This is our challenge.

One of the things that excites me about the Young Adult Mystery Squad, the group of young adults that meets weekly on Thursdays, is that inevitably the conversation gets tied back to living as Unitarian Universalists. They struggle with living UU values while working in an office setting or living with roommates with a very different faith background. It excites me because faith is to be lived. The best way to live that faith is in dialogue with our surroundings and with others.

This congregation is very good at social action advocacy. We love a good protest rally or letter campaign, important work, vital work. We need to be willing to begin the nitty gritty work of soothing and healing the victims of the social injustices. As a congregation we do some of this, but not as much. Once a year we are asked to host and staff the overflow shelter. Those who have volunteered comment on the relationships they have built with the people. Some volunteer year after year to share in the story of these relationships. Our advocacy work combined with the relationship building with those victimized by the social injustices will be more than just a voice in the wilderness. It will be a shout, a declaration loud and clear to San Diego and the world beyond that here are a people who live their faith; here are a people who represent values that can change American society towards its full potential. Because we love diversity we thrive on diversity. When you make relationships with people who are experiencing oppression in our society and you find ways in that relationship to lessen or even free them from their oppression, you will discover that they will want to be a part of this congregation and the work that we Unitarian Universalists are about and this congregation will grow even more diverse because of this type of work.

Rev. Bill Sinkford in a recent UU World discusses what he sees in Unitarian Universalism in this country. He comments with joy the willingness of our congregations to tackle the real day to day life challenges from our pulpits. He is thrilled with what he describes as the resurgence of reverence, awe, and gratitude for life as being markers for us towards becoming more of who we are meant to be. I believe it will take more than reverence, awe, and gratitude to make us more of who we can be. Yes, these are powerful developments for us Unitarian Universalists, however, I see our potential as being a powerful bridge over the great chasm that has cut across this nation. We have an ability to offer what no other religion can offer: that is the covenantal manner of being together, honoring our diversities. We can do what the revivals on Azusa Street began to do but were unable to complete and that is the healing of racism in our land. The healing of racism that was mentioned in the reading on Azusa Street was only the temporary, feel-good kind of emotionalism. We know from our own work with Journey Towards Wholeness and the JUUST change consultancy that to change from a racist point of view to living in racial equity with our neighbors takes total transformation of the whole person; the intellect, emotions, and spirit of the person have to be transformed. We know that to reinforce the transformation of the person, the institutions have to be transformed. To only touch the emotions does not make for lasting change.

We Unitarian Universalists have at our fingertips and understanding and appreciation of the world religions. We need to become conversant in World Religions so that we can share our faith of strength in diversity with others. We need to have a better understanding of our multicultural and religiously pluralistic society. We Unitarian Universalists are better at this than most other religious groups. We recognize the vast wisdom of the world religions as a source of our living tradition that nurtures our faith. But to make an impact on society in the 21st century we, as a people of faith, must be willing to commit to a better understanding of these living traditions that feed our spirits.

Recently we had the Imam from the Islamic Center here to speak on Islam. These sessions with the Imam were powerful and insightful. They helped breakdown barriers between Unitarian Universalists and our Islamic neighbors. Those who attended these sessions are now able to counteract anti-Islamic slurs that they might hear with some facts based on their experiences. This is one way we Unitarian Universalists can be a bridge to heal racism and prejudice in our country.

I believe that it is time we Unitarian Universalists reclaim the word “evangelical” from our history. In the mid-nineteenth century Unitarians and Universalists were known as Evangelical Rationalists. As humanism began to inform our faith the evangelical part of our heritage dropped from use primarily because of its association with Christianity. However, this word does not solely connote Christianity or the preaching of the gospel, it also refers to the style in which we promote our point of view, with fervency and zeal. If Microsoft can employ evangelists to market their products to customers, then we certainly can be evangelical in our faith to the community at large and I believe that it is time that we do so.